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16 October 1963

Soviet Policy and the Autobahn Incidents

1. Although an assessment of the Berlin autobahn incidents of 10-12 October must remain tentative pending possible further developments, we do not believe these events represented part of a prearranged, calculated Soviet attempt to pose a new challenge to Western access rights or to change existing US access procedures. In the absence of clear evidence of specific political motivations underlying Soviet behavior, we are inclined to view the incidents primarily as the product of genuine Soviet confusion regarding US practice on the dismounting issue and of the inability of Soviet checkpoint authorities to adjust their routine procedures to meet new and unexpected US tactics. The prompt and vigorous US reaction to what the Soviets apparently regarded as a routine convoy check on the morning of 10 October at Marienborn seems to have caught Soviet officials in both East Germany and Moscow by surprise. They almost certainly did not anticipate that the detention of convoy 27 would quickly spiral into the kind of confrontation which occurred.

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2. There is no question that one of Moscow's long-standing aims is to erode Western access rights by imposing the maximum restrictive provisions on Allied use of the autobahn. Khrushchev's references to "treading on our corns" also reflect his confidence that the West's long and exposed lines of communication to Berlin afford considerable leverage in advancing his long-range political aims with respect to West Berlin and Germany. The central question in the present situation, however, is whether the Soviet leaders consider that the time is ripe for reopening their basic Berlin demands and for exerting pressures on the sensitive access question in order to induce the West to take a more forthcoming attitude in a new round of negotiations.

3. In our judgment, Khrushchev does not view the present balance of power and the prevailing political atmosphere as providing favorable opportunities for assertive unilateral action to erode the Allied position in West Berlin, reduce ties between West Berlin and the West, or enhance the status of East Germany. The recent pro forma Soviet pronouncements on Berlin and Germany strongly suggest that the Soviet leaders presently see no alternative to living with the status quo for the foreseeable future. They recognize that

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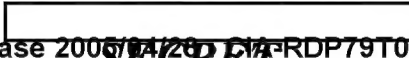
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forceful action in this area would immediately jeopardize higher priority Soviet foreign policy aims. We believe the dominant factor shaping Soviet policy is the desire to avoid major crisis situations with the West while dealing with the increasingly bitter and damaging struggle with the Chinese for leadership of the Communist movement. The serious economic problems facing the Soviet leaders probably have also strengthened their interest in a general improvement in relations with the West, partly as a means of insuring access to Western markets. In Ambassador Kohler's words, the Soviets have a major crisis on their hands with the Chinese and do not want an active cold war on two fronts.

4. In view of these preoccupations and priorities in current Soviet policy, it is difficult to see what Moscow could have hoped to gain by deliberately precipitating trouble on the autobahn at this time. While we are inclined, therefore, to rule out the hypothesis that the incidents of 10-12 October were carefully calculated and prepared in advance, we believe it is possible that the usual sensitivity of Soviet authorities to Western activities on the autobahn may have been heightened, particularly by the upsurge in the number of convoys in connection with the rotation of the US battle group



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during the week preceding 10 October. Deputy Foreign Minister Zorin commented to Ambassador Kohler on 11 October about "a good deal of convoy traffic at the present time." The Russians may have felt that the US might be tempted to take advantage of Moscow's evident desire to maintain a detente atmosphere to alter existing access procedures so as to reduce pretexts for future Soviet harassments. In addition, the Soviet guard may have been raised somewhat by the announcement of the impending large-scale airlift of US troops to West Germany

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5. The detention of convoy 27 at Marienborn on the morning of 10 October was not preceded by any indications that Soviet and East German authorities anticipated a protracted impasse or a sharp confrontation. There were no steps to alert or redeploy Soviet or East German forces in the vicinity of Berlin or elsewhere in East Germany. If the Russians had been seeking an opportunity to stage an incident over dismounting, it seems likely that they would have chosen the westbound convoy 24 (in the non-dismount category) which cleared Babelberg without challenge more than two hours before convoy 27 (in the same category) was

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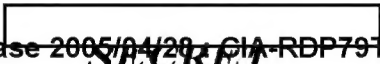
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detained at Marienborn. By the evening of 10 October, Soviet authorities in Moscow must have been aware of the US ultimatum that the convoy would proceed without clearance by 2345. Ambassador Dobrynin indicated that he had informed Moscow of US concern that evening and presumably also reported the President's remarks to Gromyko on this matter on the afternoon of the tenth. After stalling for 15 hours, the Soviets agreed to clear convoy 27 only a few minutes prior to the expiration of the US deadline.

6. When Soviet authorities again detained convoy 27 upon its arrival at Babelsberg at 0353 on 11 October, the Soviet checkpoint commander made it clear that he was acting on instructions from his headquarters. This new challenge, which the Soviet government almost certainly endorsed, probably was intended as a riposte to the vigorous US protests and ultimatum at Marienborn. The Russians may well have been gambling on the possibility that the US might be willing to grant minor concessions in order to avoid adverse political repercussions of another impasse so soon after the apparent liquidation of the Marienborn incident. In any event, the Soviet authorities quickly found themselves faced with an awkward situation when westbound convoy 29, after receiving normal clearance, remained at the Babelsberg



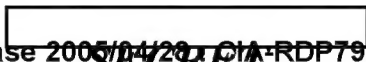
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checkpoint to support convoy 27. The next step of the Soviets was to issue their own "ultimatum" that if convoy 27 did not dismount within half an hour, autobahn access to Berlin would be blocked. After the US responded by serving notice that if the convoy was not cleared within an hour, it would proceed without clearance, Soviet and East German military vehicles moved in to block both convoys and the Soviets ostentatiously uncovered their machine guns, loaded their weapons, and emplaced two anti-aircraft weapons near the checkpoint.

7. By the morning of 12 October, responsible Soviet officials in Moscow finally recognized that prolongation of this tense contest at Babelsberg threatened to result in serious damage to important policy objectives. They had received both Secretary Rusk's warning that the incident could mean a setback for mutual efforts to resolve issues, and explanations by the Secretary and Ambassadors Kohler and Thompson of established US practices on the dismounting issue. While Ambassador Dobrynin disclaimed any knowledge of the Babelsberg incident and said it was incomprehensible to him how the incident could have occurred, Acting Foreign Minister Zorin in Moscow displayed vast confusion about the issues at stake on the autobahn. He



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refused to accept Ambassador Kohler's earlier protest, denied that the Soviets were trying to "tread on our corns," and placed the entire blame on US military authorities.

8. Perhaps as a result of intervention by Presidium-level authority, Moscow apparently instructed Soviet officials in East Germany to end the impasse early on the morning of 12 October. After several Soviet "compromise" proposals for counting convoy personnel were rejected, the Soviet checkpoint commander said he was "tired of playing games" and indicated that he would conduct his headcount with all troops remaining in their trucks. Soviet press reports of the incidents not only obscure the fact that the attempt to force the troops to dismount failed, but also seek to minimize the seriousness of the confrontation. Moscow radio asserted that the convoy "tried to evade the appropriate verification procedure" but was cleared "after complying with the verification." TASS replied to "erroneous Western press reports" by claiming that all convoys observing established procedures "were passed through the control checkpoint without delay."

9. Although we conclude that the Soviet leaders did not provoke the incidents in order to advance specific political objectives in regard to West Berlin and

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the access question, the possibility remains that they may try to capitalize on the misunderstandings that were revealed in this episode to draw the West into negotiations on both access procedures and the more fundamental political issue of the Western presence in West Berlin. Soviet intentions in this respect should become clearer if they take up Ambassador Kohler's suggestion to Zorin on 11 October that the disagreement as to existing dismounting procedures could be discussed after the checkpoint incidents were liquidated.

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